

Germinating Landscape, 1967, silkscreen print on MG Litho paper, 45 x 62cm

Conversing, re(in)verting ...

DAVID HANSEN & ARTHUR WICKS

David Hansen: I first became aware of your work in the late 1970s, specifically in the performance, video and silkscreen sequences *Measuring Stick* and *Against the Tide*. These works were very much in the performance art mode of the period; you were tied naked to a wooden St Andrew's cross on the beach at Durras, New South Wales and Glenelg, South Australia, and the incoming tide slowly moved up your body. But the underlying or rather understanding structure, the 'X' that marked the spot, actually had its origins more than a decade earlier, in hard-edge, minimal-geometric paintings and prints. How did these earlier works begin?

Arthur Wicks: In 1959, doing my Dip. Ed. at the University of Sydney, I took a visual art subject run by Frank Hinder. I had just graduated with a science degree, and although I was interested in the visual arts and had been for many years, actually, physically being involved in a subject associated with the arts was for me a bit left field. Hinder introduced us to the *The Natural Way to Draw* by Kimon Nicolaides. Looking back, this book was essentially training oneself to alternate the view of the world between the two lobes of the brain – left and right – but I wasn't to understand this until much later.

Then, in the early 1960s, I returned to live in Canberra – at that time a very much smaller community than it is now – and, in a short space of time, a series of personal encounters which made me aware that there was a completely different way to make an image of the world from that to which I had been accustomed.

One of these events was a course run by Frank Cozarelli, an American who had been associated with the New York School, and who was very familiar with the work of the American abstract expressionists. This brought me up to speed, albeit in a second-hand sort of way, with what was happening and had been happening in the arts in New York

since the 1950s. That direct contact – especially visual contact – with these works was very minimal and not readily available.

Around this same time, Daniel Thomas, then Curator of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, returned from a visit to the USA and came to Canberra to deliver a lecture – with slides! – from his recent tour. The event took place in the Griffin Centre in Civic and the place was jam-packed – standing-room only. His lecture was jam-packed, too, covering an extraordinary range of different media and practices, of artists working right then and there from one end of the US to the other. I still have a clear memory of some of the images and Daniels's descriptions of the works.

Also at this time, Donald Brook had arrived in Canberra. Donald was studying for his doctorate in philosophy and was a very lively presence in the visual arts scene; his reviews in *The Canberra Times* were sometimes provocative and often very supportive of radical and experimental modes.

By 1966 I had made up my mind to travel to Paris, to study at William Hayter's Studio 17; and with my young family I departed – by boat – in 1967. In Sydney, just before boarding the boat I visited the AGNSW, where I saw *Two Decades of American Painting*, the first time I had experienced important, international contemporary work in the flesh.

DH: This was Waldo Rasmussen's legendary exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art, New York – almost 100 enormous paintings, from Pollock to Poons, from Gorky to Guston, from Rothko to Rauschenberg. I can only imagine the impact. Was this what started you on your own large-scale, hard-edge works?

AW: That show certainly had a dramatic effect on me but the seeds were actually sown earlier. I clearly recall, a year or two previously, sitting down in the Art Club studios at Riverside talking to a visiting British painter – Bill



1/ *Thrust*, 1968; reconstructed in 2012, acrylic on linen stretched over wooden frame 102 x 102 x 41cm

2/ Arthur Wicks standing with the monumental work *Emmanuel* in St Margaret's church grounds, Downer, December 1968; synthetic latex paint/ board

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Peascod. I think this was actually 1965 because during this conversation I remember describing my uncertainty about how to progress with a romantic version of the landscape, however abstract that may be. Bill mentioned that there was an artist or group of artists in Sydney who were working with pure, solid, uninflected colour. I don't recall that he mentioned any names, but the mere comment was enough to galvanise me into a series of silkscreen prints which did exactly that. The two images that stand out are *Full Speed* and *Study in Purple*. I had earlier attended a silkscreening workshop and was frenetically generating prints. The process allows finely controlled colours to be laid down layer over layer, which was perfect for my new approach.

DH: Silkscreen prints and printmaking in general are limited in scale. Was this an issue?

AW: At one point I managed to subvert the silkscreen process. Even though I was printing the images at a relatively small scale – a maximum surface of 70 x 50cm, I constructed an image from four such rectangles and glued them down onto a thin sheet of MDF board. This became *Orbital I*, exhibited at the Contemporary Art Society's annual exhibition in Sydney in 1966. The work has since been destroyed, but it did generate two subsequent versions – a big painting (177 x 129cm) titled *Orbital II* and a much smaller screenprint, *Orbital III*. The painted version was produced in the Sydney University studio at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. It was shown in a solo exhibition at the Cité, and again the following year in the foyer of the Qantas Paris office.

DH: So it was in Paris that you began to paint those relatively large-scale, hard-edge abstractions?

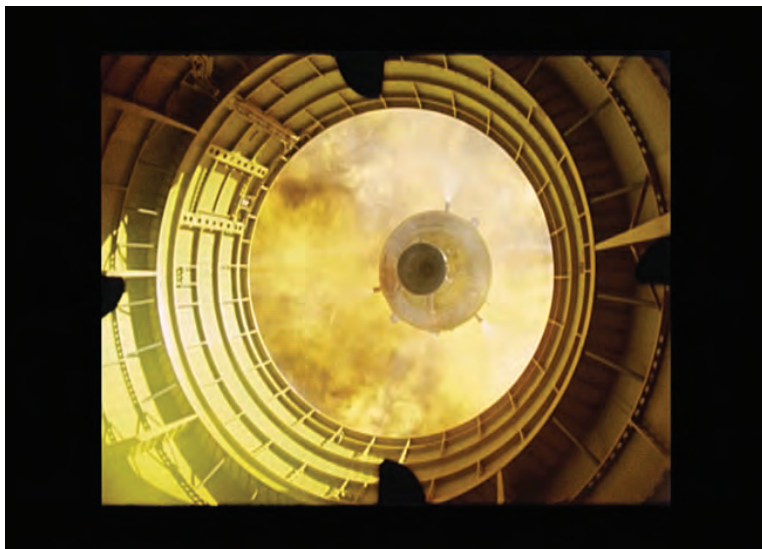
AW: Well, in the Cité studio I completed *Orbital I*, which was something of a breakthrough. Shortly afterwards I made the first version of *Thrust*. This is a curious work, with the canvas stretched around a three-dimensional

wooden support. I can't for the life of me work out how I managed to make it as robust as it was with the limited resources of the studio in Paris. It, too, was included in my Cité exhibition and also in the Qantas show. It was not heavy but it was a bloody awkward shape and it would have been impossible to bring it back to Australia. So I just threw it into the Seine and waved it goodbye. But I did record the precise measurements, and 'recon~~Thrust~~ed' it on my return to Canberra the following year.

DH: I'm interested in what happened when you returned home. After all, Europe had shown you the wonder of abstraction, and had even laid on a near-revolution for your entropic entertainment. How did they keep you down on the farm after you'd seen Patee?

AW: Wage slavery. They were pretty hectic days. At this time (1969) I was holding down a full-time job in the Bureau of Statistics (its related issues of probability and chance a deadly, Duchampian combination!) and looking after a young family, as well as developing a series of silkscreen prints and large-scale paintings. My first solo exhibition had been held in the year prior to my departure for Paris, at the Nundah Studios in Canberra, and for three years after my return I showed regularly in Canberra in both group and solo exhibitions.

One very curious work, *Emmanuel*, was constructed outside the church in Downer near where I lived. The timing was for Christmas 1968. This work was huge; close to 6 metres tall, over 2.5 metres in length and 2.5 metres wide, it needed to be anchored by two strong posts buried in the ground. It was painted with synthetic rubberised paints which survived the weather for quite a long period, but storing such a large piece outside eventually resulted in its destruction. The work was like a three-dimensional extension of *Full Speed* and possibly more directly associated with the three-dimensional



clockwise from top left: 1/ *rocket ejection*, c.late-1960s.; image courtesy Arthur Wicks.

2/ *Collapsed Walls*, 1969, silkscreen print on Kent Hollingworth paper, 70 x 49cm

3/ *Homage to the Bullet*, 1968 silkscreen print on J.B. Green paper, 47 x 68cm; Collection: Macquarie University



work titled *Slant*. The physical forces associated with *Emmanuel* are also not dissimilar to those which informed *Thrust*. Keep in mind that my earlier scientific studies still held me strongly in their grip – the forces both of classical Newtonian physics and of Quantum Mechanics.

I suppose this is the underlying connection to later work: the display or revelation of physical forces, initially in abstract, diagrammatic form, then later ‘in the flesh’, through the insertion of my own body into the landscape.

DH: And what about those other, extra-artistic events of the ‘60s – how did they influence your work at that time?

AW: There were two big things happening during the 1960s that strongly affected me. One was space exploration, with all those televised images of rockets, and modules docking in space, and then eventually, in 1969, a man walking on the moon. Several of my painted works during this period, such as *Orbital*, *Thrust*, and *Gemini*, are directly related to the language and movements and forms of these space missions.

The second major influence was the violence of the age: in the American war in Vietnam, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia; in public protest from the Watts Riots to the killings at Kent State University; in the political killings of John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther king, Malcolm X. There is a clear address to all this in *Homage to the Bullet* (printed in Paris c. May 1968) and *Assassination*.

Another influence (although this really had nothing to do with the 1960s) was my involvement with the landscape. This is particularly evident in the 1967 screenprint *Germinating Landscape*. After some years the hard-edge nature of the

paintings softened, and you can see the start of this in *Soft Centres*. Reference to the earth becomes much more obvious – particularly reference to landscape viewed from the air.

Lastly, some of the works were architectural, about reconstructing the space in which they were to be viewed. I’m thinking particularly of the prints *Blue Craze* and *Collapsed Walls* and the works *Pink Gothic* (both a print and a painting). This last seems somehow to expand into the exhibition space and could almost be locked into a corner of the room, thereby altering its perspective entirely.

DH: Well, on the matter of altered perspective, how does it all look now? How do the forms and colours, the structures and ideas of this formative period in your practice – from 1966 to 1969, even 1970 – stand up four or five decades on?

AW: I’ve got to admit that for a very long time I had been somewhat embarrassed about these works. They seemed way out of kilter with what I was doing later and the diverse materials involved in these later works had little to do with paint. So in a major clean-up of the studio a couple of years ago I was shocked to discover a large quantity of very old acrylic paint and it was still liquid! After that discovery I sort of felt sorry for some of these old paintings and vowed to spend a period of time cleaning and restoring them. Very quickly I discovered that I was delving back into my youth; into the mental space of my earlier years! Not only did I discover bits of myself firmly embedded inside these painted works but to my surprise they seemed quite at home alongside my more recent work! Same forces – different physical outcomes. And the links are there.



Aerial view of corner of Arthur Wicks: *Colour Field* survey exhibition at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 22 December 2012 to 17 February 2013; image courtesy Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Ahead of The Field, Arthur Wicks: Prints, Paintings, Shaped Canvases (1966 – 1970) recently showed at Macquarie University Gallery, 13 September to 9 October 2013.

David Hansen is a curator/writer, and Senior Researcher/Specialist at Sotheby's Australia, Melbourne. This article-interview was originally published in the catalogue for *Ahead of The Field*, 2013.



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